

The Not-yet and the Always-already: Psychoanalysis, Hegel and the Dialectics of Anticipation

Eli Noé
Centre for Critical Philosophy
University of Ghent (Ugent)
eli_noe@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper addresses the role of anticipative and retroactive processes in the constitution of the human subject, taking as a guide the psychoanalytical concept of *Nachträglichkeit*. Firstly, this concept is situated within the Freudian account of psychic temporality. Secondly, it is shown how Lacan applies the concept to the becoming of the subject through language. To illustrate this process, a simplified version of Lacan's "Graph of Desire" is used. Thirdly, a metaphysical counterpart to the principle of *Nachträglichkeit* is described, the dialectical principle of "tarrying with the negative", as formulated by G.W.F. Hegel.

Keywords: Anticipation, *Nachträglichkeit*, constitution of the subject, Freud, Lacan, Hegel.

1. Introduction

How do we account for the specificity of the human subject as an anticipating system? What sets human beings *qua* anticipating systems apart from other living creatures? In an attempt to address these questions, I shall turn to the theory of psychoanalysis, as invented by Freud and elaborated by Lacan.¹ My focus will be on a notion which seems especially relevant with regard to anticipation in human beings: *Nachträglichkeit*. First, I will sketch the role of this notion in the Freudian conception of psychological temporality and causality. Secondly, I will try to show how Lacan expanded the meaning of the notion by placing it at the centre of an account of the constitution of the subject. Finally, I will try to spell out some metaphysical implications of this account, referring to the dialectical philosophy of Hegel.

2. Freud: the Ambiguity of *Nachträglichkeit*

An interesting ambiguity pertains to the Freudian notion of *Nachträglichkeit*. Commonly translated in English as "deferred action"² it was originally introduced in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), where it refers to the delayed effect of trauma. Here, Freud argues that some childhood memories may only become traumatic

¹ The relevance of this theory with regard to anticipatory systems has already been defended in these volumes. Cf. Van de Vijver et al. (1998, 2001), Geerardyn et al. (2001), Knockaert et al. (2001).

² Following the English translator James Strachey.

"after the fact", for instance when the subject is mature enough to grasp their (sexual) significance. In this case, the translation of *Nachträglichkeit* as "deferred action" is unproblematic: we are dealing with a gap between the past and the present, occurring along a linear time axis. However, only a year later Freud used the same concept to indicate another, seemingly opposite temporal movement, which subverts the axis of time and is therefore irreducible to mere deferral or delay. In a letter to Fliess from 1896, he states: "I am working on the assumption that our psychical mechanism has come into being by a process of stratification: the material present in the shape of memory-traces is being subjected from time to time to a re-arrangement in accordance with fresh circumstances – to a re-transcription." (Freud, 1954: 233). Here we are no longer concerned with the action of the past upon the present, as in the case of "deferred action", but with the action of the present upon the past, with the *retroactive* revision of old memory traces.

The fact that Freud himself never formulated a proper theory of *Nachträglichkeit* may in part explain the ambiguity in his use of the concept. For the sake of clarity, some interpreters have attempted to isolate the two meanings of the term, as if dealing with separate phenomena. Others have overlooked the dimension of retroactivity altogether, effectively reducing the complex psychoanalytical view of psychical temporality to a linear determinism.³ However, instead of explaining away the ambiguity pertaining to the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, it may be more fruitful to view it as an index of the ambiguous, Janus-faced nature of psychical temporality itself. Such a view would in any case accord with the 'layered' organization of the Freudian model of the mind. We could say that for Freud, the topological stratification of the psyche (conscious/unconscious) goes hand in hand with its "temporal stratification", that is: with a layering of time-scales (recall Freud's statement that there is no [chronological] time in the unconscious). The subject's history hereby emancipates itself from the factual and chronological past, and is turned into a truly dynamical category. This amounts to a conception in which the subject, instead of simply being determined by history, is defined by the very possibility (and necessity) of writing and rewriting history, continually opening up and closing off possibilities for future action and interaction.

The Freudian principle of *Nachträglichkeit* thus appears to be an interesting counterpart to the concept of anticipation. While the latter surprises by introducing openness into the future, the former does so by introducing openness into the past. Both processes combine in a dynamics that may well be specific to the human subject. That is, at least, if we do not understand this specificity in terms of essence or substance, but in terms of *constitution*. Constitution involves conditionality rather than factuality, "coming-into-being" rather than being. Thus, if we hold a certain dynamics of anticipation and retroaction to be specifically human, it is because we believe that it pertains to the conditions of "coming-into-being" of the human subject. At this point, it is interesting to see how Lacan radically expanded the scope of the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*. If for

³ Cf. Laplanche and Pontalis (1967) for a critical examination of different receptions of *Nachträglichkeit*.

Freud the notion served to elucidate the mechanisms of pathogenesis, Lacan applied it to the "genesis" of the human subjectivity as such. For Lacan, the human subject is first of all a *speaking* being (*parlêtre*), an entity which, as Malcolm Bowie (1991: 184) succinctly put it, "comes into being at the point of intersection between an irrecoverable past and an unattainable future; its structure being that of a ceaseless cross-stitching, in language, between what-is-no-longer-the-case and what-is-not-yet-the-case". Lacan understands this "coming-into-being", the constitution of the subject through language, as a retroactive process, made possible by an anticipative intervention of an Other. We shall try to elucidate this in the next section.

3. Lacan: the Constitution of the Subject through Language

Let us approach the Lacanian issue of constitution-through-language via the theme of anticipation. According to Van de Vijver (1998: 36), anticipation concerns "a certain type of dynamic behaviour between systems and environments, in which the goal, even if it is recognizable *a posteriori* and *globally*, is never fully driving the behaviour *a priori* and *locally*". We can understand this definition as follows: anticipation cannot be reduced to prediction, because the goal of the anticipative process is produced during this very process, that is: in a dynamical *interaction* between the system and its environment. This interaction cannot be accounted for in determinist, mechanistic terms because it is of a particular and contingent nature. Therefore, it can only be understood in hindsight, by means of retroactive *interpretation*.⁴

While this dynamical scheme is relevant with respect to any complex biological entity, it is particularly applicable to the human subject. For in the case of human beings, the interaction with the environment, deemed so important in the above definition, is not only of vital importance, but also of a quite special nature. According to Freud and Lacan, human beings are born prematurely in comparison with other animals. Lacking coordination and orientation in the world, they are dependent on adult human beings to supply in their vital needs. It is here that *language* (more generally: the Symbolic order) plays its constitutive role. To survive, the infant has to no choice but to *articulate* its needs. This articulation demands an *interpretation*, typically by the parent, the first incarnation of 'the Other'. The parent unavoidably interprets the articulations of the infant in terms of language, in spite of the fact that the infant cannot yet speak. By means of this *anticipative* intervention, the child is introduced into the Symbolic order. This "introduction" is not at all a neutral operation. Language is radically external to the natural needs of the infant. It does not harmonically blend with the biological body, but is, so to speak, imposed on it, grafted onto it. Once introduced in language, the vital order is inextricably tangled up in a dynamics that does not look after biological necessity but instead follows its own laws.⁵ By the anticipating, interpretative gesture of the Other, the infant is 'pulled into' language, and the disparate registers of the biological and the Symbolic are brought into a dynamical relation. It is in the

⁴ Cf. Knockaert (2001: 243)

⁵ Van Haute (2000: 46)

discordance, in the *friction* between these both orders, that the properly human dimension of subjectivity can emerge.⁶

In Lacan's seminal article, "The subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire in the Freudian unconscious"⁷, the process of the constitution of the subject is represented graphically. The shown diagram is a simplified version of a larger and more complex one, that appears in the same article and is called the "Graph of Desire". The schema consists in two opposed and intersecting vectors:

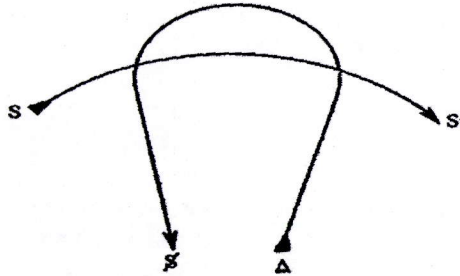


Figure 1: Lacan's "Graph of Desire"

Let us first consider the 'horizontal' line (S-S'), that runs from the left to the right. It represents what Lacan calls "the signifying chain". As is known, Lacan's interpretation of psychoanalysis was profoundly inspired by structuralist thinkers like Saussure and Lévi-Strauss. These thinkers conceived of structure as a system of differences. An element takes on its value not from itself, but from its place in an overall system; a word does not directly refer to some object, but only has its value only because it is different from other words. What Lacan called the symbolic order is essentially such a closed system of differences, a structure. While Saussure mainly focussed on the so-called *synchronic* aspects of structure, Lacan always insisted on the *diachronic* aspect, the horizontal or *temporal* dimension of structure. For this latter aspect, he coined the term "signifying chain". The signifying chain is fundamentally *dynamic*, it is perpetually in motion. It can never be complete, since it is always possible to add another signifier to it. As Lacan himself put it: "the signifier, by its very nature, always *anticipates* meaning by unfolding its dimension before it" (Lacan, 1977 [1966]: 153). Meaning is unstable and always provisional. There is no ultimate signifier that could bring the production of meaning to a halt. Rather, meaning 'insists' in the movement from one signifier to another.

Now let us look at the second vector in the schema. The triangle at the basis of this line refers to a what Lacan calls a "mythical, pre-symbolic intention". The crossed-out S is what he calls the "barred subject", the subject of language, the product of the process of constitution. The pre-symbolic intention belongs to a being which is *not-yet* in

⁶ In Van de Vijver et al. (2001: 305), this process is described in terms of identification: "Identification always takes place against the background of these two conditions, reflecting the recursive relation between at least two organizational levels: a thrusting one out of helplessness, and an attracting one on the part of the surrounding world."

⁷ Lacan (1977 [1966])

language. This is the subject of vital need, a purely biological subject, dwelling in what Lacan calls "the flux of the pre-textual". Lacan calls this subject *mythical*, precisely because for him, strictly, there cannot be such thing as a "pre-textual" or "pre-symbolic" subject. The subject is *always already* in language. Long before the child is born, the parents name it, fantasise about it, tell stories about it, etc. From the very first gestures and articulations onwards, the behaviour of the infant is symbolically framed. Therefore, any idea of a pre-symbolic, "original" psychic substance is mythical: it is itself constituted in the Symbolic, in language.

On the diagram, then, we see that the line that proceeds from the mythical intention, goes through the signifying chain, crossing it twice before it falls out of it. Crucially, the line falls out at a point *before* the point at which it has first crossed the chain. We can understand this as follows: the articulation of need, the first crossing point, is retroactively determined by the symbolization of it by the Other, the second crossing point. More concretely: the crying of the baby is interpreted by the mother, and thereby, *Nachträglich*, determined as a Symbolic expression. Already by its very articulation, need is transformed into something of a completely different order, into a signifier. As such, it no longer refers to an object that could immediately bring satisfaction, but only to another signifier. In this way, the mythical subject of need becomes, retroactively, what it always-already was: a subject of the symbolic. This subject is barred; it can never coincide with itself because it is mediated by the endless chain of signifiers. It is grounded in nothing but a loss, not a loss of something in particular, but the structural loss of the mythical, pre-symbolic immediacy.⁸

The schema thus shows how a being that is *not yet* in language retroactively becomes a subject that *always already* was in language - a process made possible by the anticipative intervention of an Other. At this point, a philosophical parallel can be drawn. In the dialectical philosophy of Hegel we find a metaphysical counterpart to the above described process. Where in the above account, difference and loss are located in the articulation of the biological need, in Hegel the metaphysical category of Being is articulated and, thereby, lost.

4. Hegel: Tarrying with the Negative

It is common to present dialectics as a constructive movement, in which two opposed ideas (the *thesis* and the *antithesis*) are reconciled in a higher unity, the *synthesis*. However, in the case of Hegelian dialectics, this is not entirely accurate. Dialectics, for Hegel, is ultimately about what he calls "tarrying with the negative". The negative can be conceived of as the category of alienation and change, of abstraction, difference and lack. In the dialectical process it usually manifests itself as an inequality between

⁸ In an early essay, "Infancy and History", Giorgio Agamben makes a very Lacanian point when he states that "[infancy] cannot merely be something which chronologically precedes language and which, at a certain point, ceases to exist in order to spill into speech. It is not a paradise which, at a certain moment, we leave for ever in order to speak; rather, it coexists in its origins with language - indeed, is itself constituted through the appropriation of it by language in each instance to produce the individual as subject." (Agamben, 2007 [1978]: 55).

subject and object. Hegel does not understand this inequality solely to be a deficiency or a defect. The negative also has positive value: it is a dynamical category, the very driving force of the dialectical movement. As the Lacanian Hegelian Slavoj Žižek put it: dialectics is not only about a reconciliation of differences, it is also the reconciliation with differences.⁹ By "tarrying with the negative", difference and negativity are valued as the essential constituents of Being.

Let us cite the crucial passage from the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, from which the term "tarrying with the negative" is lifted: "Lacking strength, Beauty hates the Understanding for asking of her what it cannot do. But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being." (Hegel, 1977 [1807]: 18-19)

For Hegel, the negative is a function of understanding, *Verstand*, the power of analysis, abstraction and mediation. The power of abstraction opposes esthetical contemplation, because it dissects a "beautiful" organic whole into its constituent parts. However, Hegel does not deplore this fact, because precisely here he locates the mighty force of Spirit. In the above passage we can recognise the three subsequent moments of the dialectical process. The first moment (*thesis*) describes Spirit in its immediacy, as unmediated Being "that keeps itself untouched by devastation". The second moment (*antithesis*) describes the alienation of the Spirit, thereby introducing negativity, loss, and "dismemberment". The third moment (*synthesis*) occurs when the Spirit, by "tarrying with the negative", converts the negative into being. In this way, the opposites are *sublated* (or as Hegel calls it: *Aufgehoben*), and Spirit attains a higher unity. This, however, does not mean the negative is cancelled in any way, but rather, that it is viewed from another perspective, or as Žižek would say, that it is looked upon awry. In the passage from antithesis to synthesis, Spirit realizes that the power of the negative, only a moment ago experienced as a threat to its integrity, in fact constitutes the positive condition of its existence. Synthesis is the insight that the negative, ultimately, is the instance that gives Spirit a minimal consistence, notwithstanding the fact that it keeps it from coinciding with itself. As Hegel put it elsewhere: the "beautiful" organic whole of the first moment, which is untouched by devastation, "only comes to being by being left behind". The lost paradise only exists insofar as it is lost. This means, paradoxically, that the negative ontologically precedes what it negates. "Tarrying with the negative" is the insight that there never was an original unity at all, that every origin itself is a mythical construction, a retroactive product of its own negation.

5. Conclusion

Both Hegel and - in the trace of Freud - Lacan describe a process that would in contemporary dynamic systems theory be called "organizational closure". It is a reflexive, circular process. Out of local constituents, a global level arises, which in turn

⁹ Cf. Žižek (1999: 95).

constrains the elements out of which it emerged. Both thinkers focus on the impossibility of accounting in a linear fashion for this emergence. They invite us to "tarry with the negative", to consider this impossibility not as a defect, but as a positive condition. In both accounts it is shown that only in the disparity of registers, in the negative space between different orders, something new and dynamical can emerge. This is surely relevant with regard to the study of anticipative systems. For as we have seen, a truly dynamical account of anticipation assumes as necessary the gap between the local and the global, between the inside and the outside, between the anterior and the posterior. These discontinuities are not epistemological obstacles we can ever hope to eliminate. On the contrary: they are true ontological conditions - not only of the systems we observe, but also of our observing them.

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